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ASSESSING THE SOVIET NAVAL BUILD-UP IN
SOUTHEAST ASIA:
THREATS TO REGIONAL SECURITY

by

DAVID WINTERFORD

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19 ABSTRACT (Continue on reverse if necessary and identify by block number) This report analyzes the stark security challenges confronting ASEAN and China as a result of the substantial and continuous strengthening of Soviet naval capability in the Asia-Pacific. The report discusses the commanding coercive benefits accruing to Moscow from the Soviet Union's successful geo-strategic leapfrog to naval and air facilities at Cam Ranh Bay and Da Nang in Vietnam. Overall, this analysis concludes that the major objectives of the Soviet naval buildup in the region are to compel Southeast Asia governments to accommodate Soviet foreign policy goals and to raise concerns in the region about the wisdom of close association with the U.S. The report calls for enhanced naval cooperation and defense-sharing between the U.S. and ASEAN in order to provide the requisite regional maritime security to counter Soviet threats.				
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ASSESSING THE SOVIET NAVAL BUILD-UP IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: THREATS TO REGIONAL SECURITY¹

The United States has focussed on two fundamental trends in the Asia-Pacific region as matters of deep concern: (i) the adverse balance of trade, particularly, but not exclusively, with Japan; and, (ii) the enduring Soviet and Soviet-client military buildup in the region. While the American response to the first trend has been largely reactive, the second trend of a growing Soviet military—especially Soviet naval—presence has stimulated vigorous U.S. activity.

Indeed, the American response to the persistent and accelerating strengthening of Soviet military capabilities in the Asia-Pacific region can be seen both in the changing configuration of the Seventh Fleet and, perhaps more surprisingly, in the recognition among U.S. naval planners that naval strategy *per se* was in need of revision. Ironically, as the Soviet Union developed a formidable modern blue-water navy able to challenge the integrity of the U.S. and its friends' interests worldwide, U.S. naval strategists adopted the ancient dictum of the first great theorist of conflict, Sun Zi (Sun Tzu)—they began studying war.

Consequently, naval defense planners in the United States have recently emerged from the most fundamental re-examination of American military strategy and force-posture in more than 30 years. The result of this intense introspection is the naval counterpart to the Strategic Defense

¹. I would like to thank the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School's Research Council for its support in preparation of this paper. The views expressed are the author's and do not represent the position of the Department of the Navy or the U.S. Government.

Initiative, that is, “the Maritime Strategy.”² This strategy emphasizes “early, forceful, global forward deployment of maritime power to deter war with the Soviet Union and to achieve U.S. war aims should deterrence fail,”³ and has been referred to as “*the* major change” made by the Reagan administration in U.S. defense planning.⁴

Although aimed at deterring Soviet global aggression, the Maritime Strategy is also a frank recognition of the critical military, economic and social importance of the Asia-Pacific region for the United States. First, militarily, the Maritime Strategy confirms that U.S. global strategists have now abandoned the “swing strategy” of the 1970s which would have drained U.S. forces in Asia to bolster European defenses.⁵ Second, the Strategy implicitly acknowledges America's vital economic links to the Asia-Pacific. Although the economic trends detailing the region's remarkable resurgence

2. In a special Supplement to the January 1986 *Proceedings* of the United States Naval Institute, the Secretary of the Navy, the Chief of Naval Operations, and the Commandant of the Marine Corps, jointly authorized *The Maritime Strategy*.

3. Linton F. Brooks, “Naval Power and National Security,” *International Security*, Vol. II, No. 2 (Fall 1986), pp. 58-88.

4. Jack Beatty, “In Harm's Way,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, May 1987, p. 37. Similar to the SDI, the Maritime Strategy has generated debate between proponents and opponents. Brooks is representative of those who support the Maritime Strategy; Colin Gray, “The Maritime Strategy,” US Naval Institute, *Proceedings*, February 1986 also argues in favor of the Maritime Strategy albeit with some modifications. Beatty is highly critical of the Strategy as are several other civilian analysts. See for example, John J. Mearsheimer, “A Strategic Mis-step: The Maritime Strategy and Deterrence in Europe,” *International Security*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Fall 1986), pp. 3-57; Keith A. Dunn and William O. Staudenmaier, “Strategy for Survival,” *Foreign Policy*, No. 52 (Fall 1983), pp. 22-41; Jeffrey Record, “Jousting with Unreality,” *International Security*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (Winter 1983-84) pp. 3-18; Robert W. Komer, “Maritime Strategy vs. Coalition Defense,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 60 (Summer 1982) pp. 1124-1144; and, Joshua M. Epstein, “Horizontal Escalation,” *International Security*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (Winter 1983-84) pp. 17-31.

5. The “swing strategy,” entailed not only drawing down military resources from the Pacific to defend Europe first, but also most of the Navy and Marine Corps resources put into the R.D.F. for Southwest Asia were taken from US forces in the Pacific.

are well known, it is worth emphasizing that the Asia-Pacific region will soon provide 25 per cent of gross world output; Japan's GNP is rivalling Soviet GNP; China's GNP may well equal current Soviet GNP in as few as 15 years; and from 1973 to 1984 U.S. trade with East Asia increased from US\$42 billion to US\$170 billion. As former Secretary of Defense Weinberger noted, 35 per cent of U.S. trade is conducted with the Asia-Pacific region.⁶ In economic terms, for over a dozen years the region has been more important to the U.S. than has Europe—an importance which must increase as China modernizes. Third, deepening personal relations in terms of immigration, social and family ties between the U.S. and countries in the region both reinforce and add new dimensions to the mosaic characterizing Asian-American relations.

It is this strengthening nexus of trans-Pacific linkages—not necessarily shared global threat perceptions—which may provide a basis for mutual security concerns between the U.S. and regional actors. Nevertheless, while U.S. economic decision-makers have long recognized the profound significance of a shift to the “Pacific century,” it was the ongoing strengthening of Soviet military forces that galvanized U.S. security strategists into examining security assumptions in the Pacific.

This paper attempts to place the Maritime Strategy in the context of security concerns in the Asia-Pacific region, particularly in Southeast Asia. First, one of the catalysts for the Maritime Strategy—the Soviet naval buildup in the Pacific—is examined; second, several key issues arising from

⁶ Secretary of Defense Casper W. Weinberger, *Annual Report to the Congress, Fiscal Year 1987* (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1986) p. 276.

the Soviet naval buildup for Sino-U.S. naval relations are addressed; finally, this paper details the implications of the Soviet naval buildup in Southeast Asia for Sino-U.S.-ASEAN security concerns.

I. The Soviet Naval Buildup in the Pacific

While the Maritime Strategy is based on specific assumptions concerning Soviet military intentions and Soviet global war scenarios, defense planners must prepare to cope with actual Soviet capabilities, measured by military hardware. Here, the record from the mid-1960s has been one of a substantial and continuous strengthening of Soviet naval capability in the Asia-Pacific region. Although the area has historically been of military concern to the Soviet Union, it has been placed second, after Europe, as a theater of war. Several analysts now view the massive and accelerating pace of Soviet military modernization in the Asia-Pacific area as clarifying the extent to which Soviet strategic planners see policies in the Far East and in Europe interactively.⁷ It is now abundantly evident that Moscow's goal is to firmly establish the Soviet Union as both a European and an Asian power.

Table 1 illustrates the dramatic change in the Soviet Pacific Fleet. From a coastal defense force, the Pacific Fleet has become a superpower-class blue-water navy capable of projecting power in order to complete (among other tasks) the encirclement of Asia. Overall, the Soviet Pacific

⁷. See for example, Harry Gelman, "The Soviet Far East Military Buildup: Motives and Prospects," in Richard H. Solomon and Masataka Kosaka, eds. *The Soviet Far East Military Buildup* (Dover, MA: Auburn House, 1986) pp. 40-55.

Table 1: Soviet Pacific Fleet Strength in Relation to Total Soviet Navy

	North Sea	Baltic Sea	Black Sea	Pacific Fleet	Total Soviet Navy
Surface Combatants					
Helicopter Carriers	1	0	0	2	3
Cruisers	10	4	9	15	38
Destroyers	17	13	19	14	63
Frigates	<u>46</u>	<u>28</u>	<u>51</u>	<u>54</u>	<u>179</u>
Total surface combatants	74	45	79	85	283
Submarines					
Strategic	40	6	1	32	79
Attack	<u>140</u>	<u>39</u>	<u>34</u>	<u>83</u>	<u>296</u>
Total submarines	180	45	35	115	375
Amphibious	13	20	24	20	77
Amphibious warfare	5	30	35	30	100
Underway					
replenishment	25	10	20	25	80
Other support ships	70	35	50	65	220
Other (mine warfare, intelligence, auxiliaries, patrol craft)	<u>220</u>	<u>400</u>	<u>345</u>	<u>475</u>	<u>1,440</u>
Grand total	587	585	588	815	2,575
Naval Aircraft					
Tactical	100	115	95	180	490
Tactical support	-	-	-	-	75
Reconn/EW	80	55	45	90	270
Antisubmarine warfare	160	45	100	175	480
Utility	<u>85</u>	<u>45</u>	<u>210</u>	<u>65</u>	<u>405</u>
Total Aircraft	425	260	450	510	1,720
Personnel	126,000	87,000	101,000	159,000	473,000

Source: U.S. Defense Department Estimates. Also see, Benjamin F. Schemmer, "The Pacific Naval Balance," *Armed Forces Journal International*, April 1984; and Anthony Preston, "The Changing Balance in the Pacific," *Jane's Defense Weekly*, September 20, 1984.

naval presence has increased 70 percent since the mid-1960s. The Soviet Union had about 50 surface combatants in the Asia Pacific region then; today there are 85. The Pacific Fleet itself is the largest of the Soviets' four fleets. With 815 ships, submarines, support vessels, patrol craft and landing craft, it comprises nearly one-third of the Soviet Navy, nearly one-third of all Soviet submarines, over 40 percent of all Soviet strategic submarines and one-third of Soviet naval manpower.

Some of the best ships available to the Soviet Navy have been assigned to the Pacific Fleet. It has two of the Soviet Navy's three operational Kiev aircraft carriers, one of the Navy's two Ivan Rogov large amphibious ships, one-half of the Soviet Union's Delta III ballistic missile submarines, one-half of the Soviet Fleet's Yankee-class submarines and it is now also equipped with Victor III attack submarines.

In other words, the Pacific Fleet is a balanced naval force that includes substantive strategic, strike, anti-surface and anti-submarine warfare capability. There does not appear to be any slackening in the modernization of this Fleet. For example, since November 1985 three new principal surface combatants were transferred to the Pacific: a Kiev-class nuclear-powered guided-missile cruiser, a Sovremennyy-class guided-missile destroyer and a Udoloy-class guided-missile destroyer. These ships are the first of their classes to be assigned to the Pacific.⁸

It is expected that the quality and capability of Soviet naval and naval air forces in the Asia Pacific will continue to improve with the introduction

⁸. Department of Defense, *Soviet Military Power 1987* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, March 1987), pp. 68-69.

of new naval assets. The Akula-class nuclear-powered attack submarine has now been launched as well as additional Kilo-class diesel-powered attack submarines. Both submarines are expected to join the Pacific Fleet. Additionally, the Helix B, a sea-based combat helicopter, has entered Soviet Naval Aviation and could be used with Soviet Naval Infantry units (Marines) in the Pacific Fleet. Given the air-assault and fire-support features of the Helix B, its introduction to the Pacific has markedly improved Soviet capabilities for conducting amphibious operations in the region.

Although not specifically examined in this paper, Soviet air and ground forces have similarly undergone substantial modernization and expansion. For example, there are now about 500,000 Soviet troops in the Far East and newer aircraft are being sent to the over 40 tactical air regiments in the region. These will complement the 80 Backfire bombers based in the Asian Theater, with the Backfires capable of striking targets throughout the Pacific with either nuclear or conventional weapons.⁹

Not only has the number and quality of Soviet naval assets in the Pacific Fleet undergone a substantial expansion, the nature of operations has changed. Soviet exercises now integrate the Soviet air arm with naval activities in increasingly sophisticated exercises.

⁹. The Soviet Air Force has deployed over 40 supersonic strategic Backfire bombers in the Far East since 1978 while more than 30 Soviet naval aviation Backfires which carry AS-4 long-range anti-ship missiles, have been deployed at Alekseyevka since 1980. The Backfires can operate against sea-lanes as far away as Midway, Guam, and the Philippines, and return to their base along the Soviet east coast, without refuelling. In total, the Soviet Pacific Fleet Air Force now includes over 90 Backfire and Badger aircraft armed with cruise missiles.

Several observers¹⁰ point out that the size of Soviet forces in the Pacific and Indian Oceans does not yet compensate for the superior quality of U.S. Naval forces (See Table 2).

Table 2: U.S. and Soviet Naval Forces in the Pacific

	West Pacific 7th Fleet	East Pacific 3rd Fleet	Total U.S. Pacific Fleet	USSR Pacific Fleet
Aircraft Carrier				
Attack	2	4	6	0
Helicopter	1	5	6	3
Battleships	0	1	1	0
Cruisers	2	15	17	15
Destroyers	6	25	31	14
Frigates	<u>14</u>	<u>31</u>	<u>45</u>	<u>54</u>
Total	25	81	106	85
Submarines				
Strategic	*	*	3	32
Attack	<u>9</u>	<u>31</u>	<u>40</u>	<u>83</u>
Total	29	31	43	115
Amphibious	6	26	32	20
Underway replenishment	5	25	30	25
Other Support Ships	3	7	10	65

* Deployment locations of three U.S. SSBNs is classified.

Sources: For Soviet Pacific Fleet, see Table 1.
 For U.S. Pacific Fleet, See Alvin H. Bernstein, "The Soviets in Cam Ranh Bay," *The National Interest*, Spring 1986

However, the Soviet Union also focuses on countries other than the U.S., for example, China. In this respect, Soviet Pacific forces remain well

¹⁰. See for example, Alvin H. Bernstein, "The Soviets in Cam Ranh Bay," *The National Interest*, No. 3 (Spring 1986), p. 20.

ahead of China's navy (See Table 3 below) and of course, well ahead of any of the much smaller ASEAN navies.¹¹

Geo-politically, the entire Soviet position in Siberia and in the Pacific is flanked on land by China and generally offshore by the U.S. with its sea and air power in bases in Japan (including Okinawa) and in the Philippines. As is well-known, the Soviet Pacific Fleet must pass through the Soya Strait (between Hokkaido and Sakhalin), the Tsugaru Strait (between Hokkaido and Honshu) or the Tsushima Strait (between Honshu and Korea). Passage through the Soya brings Soviet naval power into the Sea of Okhotsk from which it would need to pass between the Kuril Islands in order to reach open sea. Since Soya freezes over during the winter, the Soviet fleet must, in reality, rely on the Tsugaru Strait. Although the major and growing Soviet Naval base on the Kamchatka peninsula at Petropavlovsk has unrestricted access to the Pacific, Petropavlovsk has the double disadvantage of ice for several months of the year and acute isolation. It is more than 1000 miles from the nearest railhead.¹²

The difficulty of operating through the choke-points in Northeast Asia helps to explain the determination of the Soviet Union in effecting a successful "geo-strategic leapfrog"¹³ by establishing a major base complex at

¹¹. For a concise assessment of ASEAN naval forces see the annual review (March issue) of "Far Eastern Navies" in US Naval Institute, *Proceedings*,. For a relatively recent qualitative assessment, also see, Bradley Hahn, "Southeast Asia's Miniature Naval Arms Race," *Pacific Defense Reporter*, September 1985, pp. 21-24. The best-known data-source on world navies is *Jane's Fighting Ships*, (London: Janes).

¹². Colin S. Gray, "Maritime Strategy and the Pacific: The Implication for NATO," *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (Winter 1987), p. 12.

¹³. Gray, "Maritime Strategy and the Pacific," p. 12.

Cam Ranh Bay and Da Nang. It is this Soviet military presence in Vietnam, and Soviet support for Vietnam's occupation of Kampuchea, which has sharpened U.S. concerns about Soviet objectives in the Asia-Pacific region, particularly in Southeast Asia.

Indeed Cam Ranh Bay is the largest Soviet naval deployment base outside the USSR.¹⁴ The dramatic and inexorable increase in Soviet naval presence in Southeast Asia made possible by the acquisition of this base is apparent when it is recalled that prior to 1979, the Soviet Navy operated only occasionally in the area. From an initial five to eight ships in 1979, Cam Ranh Bay is today base for 25 to 30 Soviet naval ships which now routinely patrol the South China Sea. For the first time this deployment includes the stationing of Soviet attack submarines in this region; specifically, Charlie-, Echo- and Kilo-class submarines, as well as Kashei-class destroyers and Nanuchka-class guided-missile patrol combatants, are among the Soviet ships supported by the naval facilities at Cam Ranh Bay. From the 8500-ton floating dry dock (a dry dock capable of servicing a Soviet cruiser) and two floating piers put in place in 1982, the Soviet commitment to maintaining Cam Ranh Bay has been further demonstrated by the recent completion of a seventh pier. Unlike other Third World bases where the Soviets have historically favored mostly movable or "removable" assets, U.S. defense planners have recently concluded that the Soviet Union is now constructing *permanent* facilities at Cam Ranh Bay, indicating a highly significant change in Soviet basing policy.¹⁵

¹⁴. Department of Defense, *Soviet Military Power 1988* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, April 1988) p. 124.

¹⁵. *Soviet Military Power 1988*, p. 139.

One of the most remarkable developments in this buildup occurred in November 1983, when the Soviet Union stationed nuclear-capable attack-bombers in Vietnam. This seems to have been the first time since 1971 that Soviet-manned bombers have been deployed to bases outside areas contiguous to the Soviet bloc. Currently, 16 Badger bombers are stationed at this installation, with 10 being strike variance capable of carrying anti-ship cruise missiles. Today, the composite naval air unit at Cam Ranh also includes, in addition to the Badger strike-aircraft, Bear D Reconnaissance and Bear F anti-submarine aircraft and MIG-23/Flogger fighters.¹⁶ The Badger bombers give the Soviet Union a *regional* strike capability over all the ASEAN states, Southern China and possibly as far east as the U.S. territory of Guam and the western part of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, while the MIG 23/Flogger fighters provide air defense and strike escort for the Badgers in their regional operations. Although opinion is divided on the threat this new offensive capability may ultimately pose to U.S. naval operations and facilities in the region, the Soviet deployment of bombers to Vietnam sets a precedent and thus a new level for future Soviet military deployment to Cam Ranh, perhaps to include the stationing of Backfire bombers.

The strengthening of Soviet strategic attack and ocean-going capabilities in Southeast Asia is further underlined by expanding Soviet facilities in Northeast Asia (principally Vladivostock, Petropavlovsk and the small port in Korsakor, astride Soya, which is being “transformed into a

¹⁶. *Soviet Military Power 1988*, p. 28.

major naval base”).¹⁷ In this respect, the marked improvement in Soviet-North Korean military relations since 1984 takes on added salience.¹⁸ While some analysts tend to dismiss the appeal of North Korean ports to Soviet naval strategists or the appeal to North Korea of Soviet access to Korean bases,¹⁹ airspace over North Korea is surely another matter. Indeed a significant consequence of improving Soviet-North Korean relations has been the expansion in Soviet intelligence overflights of North Korea that, until 1968, had been strictly limited to southbound flights. Soviet strike-aircraft based at Cam Ranh Bay are now also permitted to overfly North Korea on their northward flights to the Soviet Union. During these two-way flights, Soviet bombers conduct simulated missile strikes as well as reconnaissance against U.S. and South Korean forces, Okinawa, Japan and Chinese naval facilities. It is reported that North Korea, in return, has begun receiving forty-six MIG-23/Flogger fighters as well as SA-3 surface-to-air missiles. In 1987, the Soviet Union apparently provided Pyongyang with two new items, the ZSU-23-4 self-propelled anti-aircraft gun and long-range SA-5 surface-to-air missiles.²⁰

¹⁷. Donald G. Daniel and Gael D. Tarleton, “The US Navy in the Western Pacific,” *Asia Pacific Community*, No. 31 (Winter 1986), pp. 123-124.

¹⁸. In 1984, a Soviet military manual described the North Korean east coast port of Najia as “fully integrated into the Soviet [military] system.” Soviet docking and refuelling rights on North Korea’s west coast “would allow the Soviet Pacific Fleet to outflank the Japan Straits and frustrate [efforts by the US and Japan] to bottle it up in the Sea of Japan.” *Wall Street Journal*, June 16, 1986. Since 1985 the Soviet Navy has made a number of symbolic port visits to Wonson, North Korea and there have been combined North Korean-Soviet naval exercises in 1986, 1987 and 1988.

¹⁹. Edward Olsen, “Keeping North Korea Out of Soviet Hands,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, May 14, 1987.

²⁰. *Soviet Military Power 1988*, p. 136.

The Soviet military buildup in the South China Sea underlines the increasing reach of Soviet military power and the potential political influence of the Soviet Union on regional issues. Indeed, the enormous benefits associated with the “geo-strategic leapfrog” from frozen northern bases to Vietnam are perhaps indicated by the financial cost; since 1978 Soviet military aid to Vietnam has totalled over US\$9 billion, a military aid program supported by 2500 Soviet military advisers stationed in-country. Additionally, more than US\$8 billion in Soviet economic assistance has been provided to Vietnam during the period 1978-85. In 1986, Moscow pledged to double its economic assistance during the following five years. Currently, Soviet aid is US\$1.5-\$2 billion annually. This Soviet generosity-in-return-for-bases has yielded multiple benefits for Vietnam as well; the magnitude of Soviet assistance has kept Vietnam’s failed economy from collapsing altogether, while permitting Vietnam to continue both occupying Kampuchea, and countering Chinese military pressure through deployment of 700,000 Vietnamese troops along the China border.

In sum, there has been enormous Soviet military buildup in the Asia-Pacific region from 1965 to the present. While Soviet military capability was initially based on its status as a major land-power, the last dozen years have witnessed the deployment of modern, sophisticated and ever-increasing Soviet naval and air forces. In turn, to mitigate disadvantages associated with their unenviable northern bases, the Soviets have solidified an enduring (if costly) alliance with Vietnam. Coupled with improving relations with North Korea, the Soviet Union has thus dramatically advanced its military reach through the length and breadth of the region: indeed the Soviet fleet is

now capable of projecting power along the entire arc of Asia from the Sea of Japan to India.

Careful observers²¹ have noted, however, that the Soviet Union's strategic position in the Asia-Pacific region is not unassailable. Much of the Soviet Pacific Fleet is still in Northeast Asia and is thus vulnerable to blocking by Japan despite the base at Cam Ranh Bay *if* the Japanese government either permits the United States to undertake appropriate operations from Japanese territory *or* Japan increases its own defense capabilities to share this defense burden. Similarly, a modernized Chinese military (*if* available) would post severe difficulties for Soviet assets east of the Urals *if* China was part of a tacit alliance against the Soviet Union which, in turn, may itself depend on Chinese calculations of Soviet capabilities to win a war.

Within Southeast Asia, the Soviet leapfrog to Cam Ranh Bay certainly permits Soviet combat operations in the South China Sea either against local actors or as part of the initial stages of general war. It also carries the potential for using Vietnam as a staging area against U.S. Pacific forces *if* the base defenses are further strengthened by upgrading the missile sites, improving the early-warning and command and control system and replacing the Badgers with Backfire bombers. Currently, given both the global reach of the U.S. Navy and the nascent defenses of Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam is less

²¹. See for example, Sheldon W. Simon, "The Great Powers' Security Role in Southeast Asia: Diplomacy and Force," in Young Whan Kihl and Lawrence E. Grinter, eds., *Asian-Pacific Security: Emerging Challenges and Responses* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1986) p. 92; Gray, "Maritime Strategy and the Pacific"; and, Bernstein, "The Soviets in Cam Ranh Bay."

useful to the Soviets in a confrontation with the United States than it is for achieving Soviet objectives against regional actors.

II. Soviet Objectives in Southeast Asia

In Southeast Asia, as elsewhere, the Soviet Union sees its expanding military power as a key means of accomplishing a mix of global and regional political, ideological, economic as well as military, objectives.

First, in terms of global interests, the Soviet military buildup in Asia, and more generally Soviet militarization of its Asian friends and allies,²² are viewed as critical means by which Moscow can entrench Soviet claims to superpower status. Achieving superpower status, and thereby receiving any associated benefits, must be both earned and maintained by continuing new investments. Since other traditional avenues are not available in Moscow, viz, economic prowess and an appealing political system, the Soviet Union relies mainly on a single tool for global prominence—its military hardware.²³ It is worth emphasizing that at the time the United States was withdrawing as a land-power in Asia and becoming essentially a maritime power, the Soviet Union was simultaneously allocating significant resources to enhancing its burgeoning Pacific Fleet, building onto its already superior land capability.

However, the Soviets still remain largely unsuccessful in translating military might into other useful currencies. One noted observer has suggested seven regional developments in the early 1980s which have

22. David Winterford, "Security, Sovereignty and Economics: Armaments Limitation in Asia" *Pacific Focus*, Vol. II, No. 1 (Spring 1987), pp. 135-164.

23. Simon "The Great Powers' Security Role in Southeast Asia" p. 90.

prevented the Soviets from gaining political influence commensurate with Soviet military assets: (i) the new cold war between the communist states; (ii) China's dramatic turn to the West; (iii) the gradual reassertion of Japan; (iv) the end of the period of U.S. drift; (v) the development of ASEAN; (vi) the Korean standoff; and, (vii) the dynamic economic growth in the region which could lead eventually to a new Asia-Pacific trading community.²⁴

Indeed, another prominent analyst has argued that "the Soviet role in Southeast Asia is treated with considerable hostility by ASEAN"²⁵ since Soviet actions: (i) obstruct the realization of the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality; (ii) probably accelerated the development of security cooperation between ASEAN and outsiders, and; (iii) stimulated China's efforts to subvert the Soviet presence in the area.²⁶

Soviet willingness to accept negative relations with ASEAN as a cost of "entanglement" with Vietnam,²⁷ indicates the substantial regional pay-off provided by the naval and air complex at Cam Ranh Bay. Vietnam's willingness to grant basing rights to the Soviets:

- permits the Soviet Union to break out of its geographic and strategic encirclement in Northeast Asia,

²⁴. Donald S. Zagoria, ed., *Soviet Policy in East Asia*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 13, cited by Young Whan Kihl and Lawrence E. Grinter, "New Security Realities in the Asian Pacific: Perspectives, Purpose and Approach," in Kihl and Grinter, eds., *Asian-Pacific Security*, p. 11.

²⁵. Simon, "The Great Powers' Security Role in Southeast Asia," p. 94.

²⁶. Simon, "The Great Powers' Security Role in Southeast Asia," p. 95.

²⁷. Simon, "The Great Powers' Security Role in Southeast Asia," p. 90.

- enables the Soviets to flank Japan's energy corridor through the Indonesian Islands;
- augments the sustainability of Soviet naval developments in the Indian Ocean;
- provides a possible counterbalance to U.S. bases in the Philippines;
- extends Soviet power-projection towards Australia;
- raises Chinese perceptions of vulnerability;
- counters any future Chinese submarine threat in the area;
- provides a Soviet forward deployment base useful in regional conflicts involving actors like China, Vietnam and ASEAN; and
- complicates U.S. naval planning in the region during crises (or possibly a general war).²⁸

Second, the apparent Soviet interest in invigorating a sluggish domestic economy is reflected in recent Soviet economic initiatives in the region. Developing Soviet Far Eastern and Maritime regions, for example, mandates access to the technological and financial dynamism of the Asia-Pacific region.²⁹ In turn, the interest of regional actors in economic rapprochement with the Soviet Union is reflected in the major trade agreement signed by China and the Soviet Union in 1985 and in the lifting of Japanese economic sanctions against the Soviet Union in November 1985. Recent Soviet actions in the South Pacific, with the Soviets to some extent seizing opportunities for political and economic gain arising from America's tuna wars and general indifference in the area, give further concrete

²⁸. Gray, "Maritime Strategy and the Pacific"; and, Bernstein, "The Soviets in Cam Ranh Bay."

²⁹. The attractiveness for Japan of trading Japanese investment for Soviet raw materials has possibly faded. Japan has been meeting its energy needs without Siberian fuel and the Japanese economy has generally passed beyond the stage of processing raw materials.

expression to Gorbachev's 1986 Vladivostok speech. Also noteworthy is the fact that in November 1986 the Soviet Union was, for the first time, an observer at meetings of the Pacific Economic Cooperation Conference (PECC). It has been reported that the Soviets would like to become a full member of PECC.³⁰ Similarly, Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze's somewhat unusual tour of Southeast Asia in March 1987³¹ was meant to signal new Soviet interest in trade with the area as well as to project Soviet "Asian-power" status while simultaneously fuelling the competition between the Soviet Union and China for friends in ASEAN.

III. Regional Reaction to the Soviet Military Presence in Southeast Asia

It is well-known that ASEAN remains split on the nature of the threat from the Soviet Union and its client in Southeast Asia. For example, both Indonesia and Malaysia have long feared potential Chinese regional dominance far more than Soviet or Soviet-Vietnamese intentions. For them, China seems the longer-term threat while the Soviet Union may appear as a passing, transitory danger. Chinese officials have become more alert and sensitive to these regional fears. Indeed during his tour of the region in October 1986, Chinese Vice-Premier Tian Jiyun sought to reassure Malaysia that China is not interested in encouraging political dissent among Malaysia's Chinese population. Meanwhile, Indonesia has begun to adopt a somewhat more relaxed attitude toward China with both countries having

³⁰. Michael Richardson, "Soviets' Bid for Friends in Southeast-Asia," *Pacific Defense Reporter* July 1986, p. 14.

³¹. An unexpected twist to the Shevardnadze trip was the Soviets' apparent intention to use India as a broker in the PRC/ASEAN-Vietnam standoff over Kampuchea. *Christian Science Monitor*, March 3, 1987.

now initiated tentative direct trade. Whether these actions signal a fundamental change is still unclear. Indonesia has been outspoken in its position that a secure Vietnam is a necessary counterweight to China's regional ambitions. Indeed, Indonesian fears that prolongation of the Kampuchean conflict will compel ever closer Sino-Thai relations (thus drawing China further and further into Southeast Asian affairs) gain in credibility as the conflict persists. Nevertheless, Indonesian objections have been muted by the recognition that Thailand is now the front-line state with Vietnam.

Core disagreements have also surfaced over whether the increasing Soviet presence in Southeast Asia poses a military threat to ASEAN. In an unambiguous statement, Indonesia has said that the Soviet military buildup is "no threat to us" and comments made by the Indonesian Foreign Minister during President Reagan's visit to Bali underscored the increasing reluctance of Indonesia to be associated with an anti-Soviet posture.³² Malaysia also seems skeptical about the military threat posed by the Soviet Union. Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad has stated that "the Soviet bogey seems overplayed" and that Soviet naval deployments in the Pacific are "natural" and intended to balance those of the U.S.. The Prime Minister has, however, cautioned against becoming complacent about Soviet military power in the region.³³

Singapore and Thailand, on the other hand, both regard the Soviet Union and Vietnam as the main threats to regional stability. Prime Minister

³². Richardson, "Soviets' Bid for Friends in South-East Asia," p. 14.

³³. Richardson, "Soviets' Bid for Friends," p. 14.

Lee Kuan Yew dismissed suggestions that Gorbachev's Asia policies represented a significantly new departure. Instead, Prime Minister Lee argued that Moscow's goal in the Pacific remained unchanged, a goal which he characterized as exercising influence "to the maximum that they believe their built-up strength entitles them to."³⁴

Opinion within ASEAN seems more united on Moscow's ability to alter Vietnam's aggressive policies in the region. However, the considerable advantages the Soviets derive from bases in Vietnam give Hanoi a notable bargaining chip in retaining the flow of critical Soviet military and economic aid. For Vietnam, the Soviet connection provides both necessary war-making resources and strengthened protection against possible Chinese naval and air deployments in the South China Sea.³⁵ While this does provide Moscow with some leverage—especially over Vietnam's disastrous domestic economic policies—it is neatly balanced by Soviet fears that coercing Vietnam over Kampuchea may well entail losing Cam Ranh Bay. The consequent inability to deploy Soviet submarines continuously in the South China Sea and, at some future date, to replace the Badgers with Backfire bombers, may seem a heavy cost to Moscow's global strategic planners. Applying pressure sufficient to compel Vietnamese withdrawal might also undermine Soviet credibility among its friends and allies elsewhere who are undertaking similarly provocative and antagonistic actions.

In this respect, it is worth noting that in a top-level policy declaration delivered to the Sixth Congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party in

³⁴. Richardson, "Soviets' Bid for Friends," p. 12.

³⁵. See below, pp. 23-25.

December 1986—well after Gorbachev's Vladivostok speech—Yegor Ligachov stated that Moscow wanted to develop relations with China “on a principled basis, without damage to the interests of other countries.”³⁶ The Soviet Union may well have been implying that Moscow would set limits to its evident desire for political accommodation with China—or ASEAN for that matter—the most notable limit being threats to its alliance with Vietnam.

While ASEAN governments continue their assessment of the degree to which Moscow's military buildup is threatening regional stability, China has, in the past, unambiguously warned of national, regional and global dangers arising from the Soviet-Vietnamese alliance. Seeing the threat posed by Soviet bases in Vietnam, China has observed that: “By moving northeast [Soviet naval and air] units can blockade China by sea and launch a joint converging attack on the country, with Soviet ground forces stationed along the Sino-Soviet border moving down from the north.”³⁷

Since China has based its security policy partly on a strong NATO in the west and a U.S. presence in the Pacific, the PRC is understandably concerned about the growth of the Soviet navy. A Soviet capacity to deny the seas to the U.S. would post significant dangers for NATO and for U.S. alliances in the Pacific. As the Chinese once pointed out:

Washington used to possess an obvious naval superiority, but the Soviet Navy has since grown steadily through modernization, and is

³⁶. Anon., “Moscow's Dilemma: How to Eat its Cake and Have it, too,” *Pacific Defense Reporter*, March 1987, p. 9.

³⁷. Beijing, *Shiejie Zhishi*, March 16, 1985 in *FBIS China* (March 26, 1985), c. 1 cited in Kenneth G. Weiss, “Dragon at Sea: China's Navy in Strategy and Diplomacy,” in James L. George ed., *The Soviet and Other Communist Navies: The View from the Mid-1980s* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1986), p. 390.

now able to contend with Washington all around the world. The Soviet Union can now strike North America. The superpowers' rivalry over the seas will intensify with time because the sea not only constitutes an economic lifeline for the West, but serves as a vital route for troops and supplies in wartime.³⁸

The Chinese have also seen the Soviet presence in Cam Ranh Bay in global terms:

In the event of war, Soviet naval and air units stationed in Cam Ranh Bay can set off eastward and, in cooperation with the Soviet forces stationed in bases at home, launch a two-pronged attack from the southern and northern flanks against the U.S. Seventh Fleet and the U.S. military installations in the Western Pacific. By moving southward, the Soviet units in Cam Ranh Bay can promptly seize the Strait of Malacca, the strategic passage linking the Pacific and the Indian Ocean, and thus cut off the oil supply line to Japan, as well as the link between the U.S. fleets deployed in the two oceans. By moving northward, these units can blockade China by sea and launch a joint converging attack on the country, with the Soviet ground forces stationed along the Sino-Soviet border moving down from the north. And, finally, by moving westward, the Soviet units from Cam Ranh Bay can enter the Indian Ocean and the Gulf region, join forces with the Soviet Black Sea Fleet, and surround Europe from its flank.... This has not only strengthened [the Soviet] strategic posture in the Asian-Pacific region but is also of great significance to [the Soviet] global strategic deployment.³⁹

Nevertheless, the Chinese have faith in the U.S. Navy's capability to deal with the Soviets. Indeed, some Chinese observers have cautioned against overestimating the potential of the Soviet threat from its bases in Vietnam. In a statement which is only partially comforting, one Chinese analyst had this comment:

³⁸. Beijing, *Beijing Review*, April 23, 1984, in *FBIS China* (May 2, 1984) A6-7 cited in Weiss, "Dragon at Sea," p. 396.

³⁹. Beijing, *Shiejie Zhishi*, March 16, 1985, in *FBIS China* (May 2, 1985) A6-7 cited in Weiss, "Dragon at Sea," p. 396.

Some of the strategists overestimate the potential of the Soviet threat with its forward bases in Vietnam.... With American bases in the Philippines in the east, Indonesian Natuna Island base in the south, and the Chinese Southern Fleet in the north, the sphere of actions for the Soviet naval-air detachment in Vietnam would be limited in the South China Sea.⁴⁰

As a result of these concerns China's defense planners have been countering the Soviets in Vietnam and striving to improve China's navy both in terms of quality and in the number of ships. While a detailed assessment of China's naval capability⁴¹—or for that matter, the naval capability of the ASEAN states—lies beyond the scope of this paper, the data in Table 3 indicate that China's navy is not a negligible force. From the mid-1970s the number of Chinese ships increased dramatically. China accelerated production of larger surface warships and introduced a new class of frigates. The PRC also began producing new ocean auxiliary and underway-replenishment oilers—ships necessary for extended operations. Moreover, China's naval planners have put more emphasis on the development of nuclear submarines such as the Han-class SSN and Xia-class SSBN. As well, the PRC has apparently tested successfully a submarine-launched ballistic missile in their Golf-class submarine. As a result, China's conventional submarine fleet increased from some 35 to over 100 units. Although most of these submarines are older Romeos and Whiskeys, they are evidently well-suited to operations along the China coast. As the table indicates, the Navy also has over 860 land-based aircraft.

⁴⁰. Hua Di, "The Soviet Threat to the Northern Pacific Region from an Overall Point of View," unpublished paper, cited in Weiss, "Dragon at Sea," p. 397.

⁴¹. See Weiss, "Dragon at Sea."

The naval order-of-battle presented in Table 3 indicates that China's navy is more than a coastal defense force—one analyst has referred to it as a “contiguous seas” force. However, major deficiencies exist in China's destroyers and frigates in terms of modern sensors and weapons, electronic warfare or electronic counter measures. The Naval Air Force is also composed largely of obsolete aircraft. Among its deficiencies, the air force lacks sophisticated airborne sensors and seaborne helicopters, making it difficult to detect Soviet submarines. The Navy's air defense is handicapped by a lack of all-weather fighters, air-to-air missiles, and airborne- and shipborne-controlled intercept-radars. Chinese aircraft also lack an aerial refueling capability so their combat system is limited to 150 nautical miles offshore.

The current direction of China's naval modernization and somewhat parallel beliefs among Chinese and American naval strategists concerning naval security threats in the Asia-Pacific region, underscore the nascent and limited naval relationship between the U.S. and the PRC. This relationship must be seen, however, within the context of America's longer association with other nations in Southeast Asia. To the extent that ASEAN sees the growth of Soviet naval and air-power at Cam Ranh Bay as a threat to regional security, then those states may also “increase their own informal defense cooperation and assist the U.S. Seventh Fleet patrols....”⁴² Such cooperation may become “necessary for the maintenance of a loosely spread Asia-Pacific security net.”⁴³

⁴². Simon, “Cross Regional Security Collaboration in Asia: A Balance Sheet,” *Pacific Focus*, Vol II, No. 1 (Spring 1987), p. 63.

⁴³. Simon, “Cross Regional Security Collaboration in Asia,” p. 65.

IV. Conclusion

The U.S. Maritime Strategy is designed to address conflicts ranging from localized crisis-response to a general war. Since the core of the strategy is maintaining deterrence in an era of possible nuclear stalemate, the key goal of the peacetime component of the strategy is to further international stability through support of regional balances of power. It assumes a degree of collective or cooperative security arrangements with friends, allies and sometimes, with neutrals. Indeed, without that cooperation, U.S. actions in defense of its own regional interests and those of others would be constrained, particularly in the context of limited war.

Here, the buildup of Soviet naval forces in the Pacific is a stark measure of emerging regional imbalances. Until the Soviet Union consolidates its geo-strategic leapfrog to Vietnam, it is this regional power-projection capability, not necessarily the Soviet Pacific Fleet's war-making capability against the United States, that is of most concern. This regional power-projection entails a range of actions including using the Soviet Navy to maintain presence, conduct surveillance, threaten the use of force, conduct naval gunfire or air strikes, establish a blockade, encircle adversaries, and prevent the intervention of other forces. It is the very flexibility provided by the calibrated quality of naval forces—intrusive or out-of-sight, threatening or non-threatening, easily dispatched or easily withdrawn—that makes them such a potent political as well as military weapon for the Soviets in the region.

To some degree, shared views on the Soviet global threat and Soviet-Vietnamese regional threats have put China and the United States on a

parallel path. It is felt that Sino-U.S. cooperation in modernizing China's naval force will complicate Moscow's calculation of the "correlation of force" while sending a signal to Vietnam of continued resistance to its aggressive action. However, despite some overlapping views, U.S. defense planners have recently been cautioned not to "assume Chinese co-belligerency in functional, tacit alliance."⁴⁴

Indeed, the U.S. remains concerned about adverse, or at least unsettled, reaction in ASEAN arising from Sino-U.S. military ties. One issue raised within ASEAN is that a U.S. naval relationship with China might upset the naval balance in the region without significantly improving Chinese capabilities against the Soviets. However, "if the U.S. and Soviet Union are subtracted from the equation, there is no naval balance; rather there is an imbalance that strongly favors the PRC.⁴⁵ Thus U.S. assistance for China's navy "must help China against the Soviet threat—since these capabilities are already so great against the other regional states."⁴⁶

Several constraints mitigate an evolving Sino-U.S. relationship and thus may defuse some ASEAN concerns:

- Chinese fears of becoming too dependent on the U.S. for arms;
- China's reluctance to provoke the Soviet Union unduly by establishing close military ties with the U.S.;
- China's recognition of ASEAN concerns;

⁴⁴. Gray, "Maritime Strategy and the Pacific," p. 13.

⁴⁵. Weiss, "Dragon at Sea," p. 400.

⁴⁶. Weiss, "Dragon at Sea," p. 400.

- the limitation on the amount of foreign exchange China has available for modernization of the military;
- U.S. reluctance to move further than regional opinion permits; and,
- U.S. uncertainty about the future direction of China's foreign policy.

While there are conflicting views on the nature of the threat posed by Soviet naval power in the region, it is most likely that Moscow has built up its military strength in order to compel regional governments to accommodate Soviet foreign policy goals; to renew concern within the region about the wisdom of close association with the United States; and, to aggravate U.S. resource constraints in meeting Moscow's regional and global militarization.

Although all ASEAN nations are maritime states and therefore vulnerable to threats of a potential Soviet naval blockade or worse, U.S. defense planners must exercise caution before assuming that regional actors share Washington's abiding concern with Soviet intentions. Both divisions within ASEAN and dilemmas in Sino-U.S. military relations mandate that Washington first work to enhance security perceptions on the basis of the mosaic of ties interlinking the Asia-Pacific area. Specifically, U.S. policy-makers need to address regional issues through increasingly sensitive diplomacy, maintaining an open trading system and using balanced and gradual military enhancement. While the U.S. needs to make absolutely clear America's determination to resist the Soviet Union in Southeast Asia, appeals for regional security cooperation should be based on an unambiguous *prior* commitment by the U.S. to the regional goals of growth and development of diversified economies. To meet these regional goals, enhanced naval cooperation between the U.S. and ASEAN might well be a

judicious commitment of resources on both sides in order to provide the maritime security necessary for continued economic development.

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